

Letter to the *Weekly Worker*

Spartacist League vs. the CPGB on 2024 election:

Debating with Labourites

Oehlerites, ultra-lefts and sectarians—this is how the CPGB described us, the Spartacist League, during and after the 5 May debate over the general election. Why? Because of our basic assertion that voting Labour in the coming election is against the interests of the working class. Throughout the debate, the CPGB argued that a split with Starmer's Labour was not what was posed in this election and that a vote for it remained necessary in the absence of a better choice.

What appeared like the CPGB's strongest argument against us is that Labour has always been pro-imperialist, that Starmer does not represent a qualitative change on this matter, and thus our insistence that the task is a break from Starmer fuels the illusion that Labour without him would be a step forward. The CPGB also claimed that we were rejecting Lenin, the early Comintern and the policy of the united front. The CPGB's logic is that since Labour remains a workers party, there is a class line between Labour on one side and the bourgeois parties (Tories, Lib Dems, Greens etc) on the other. Therefore, a vote for Labour, despite its rotten leadership, still represents a vote for the working class.

We do not deny that Labour remains a bourgeois workers party or that it has always been pro-imperialist. But this does not mean that communists always support Labour—a thoroughly Labourite conclusion. The class character of a party cannot be the sole criterion for defining the task of communists. Rather, what is decisive—and what the CPGB completely ignores—is the role that such a party plays in the conflict of classes in a particular context and whether support for it strengthens the proletariat's position at a particular stage of its struggle.

Lenin and the Labour Party

If we look at Lenin in 1920, he arrived at the conclusion that communists should support Labour and even seek affil-

iation to it not merely by looking at the party's character but centrally by looking at the political dynamics of British politics at the time. Back then, Labour had never been in power. Its membership encompassed millions of workers galvanised by the 1917 October Revolution, who (mistakenly) saw the Labour Party as the way forward to socialism. In turn, the British bourgeoisie viewed Labour as a threat to their interests. In *Left-wing communism: an infantile disorder*, Lenin quotes at length Lloyd George, who advocated the unity of Liberals and Conservatives against Labour, which Lloyd George equated with Bolshevism.

As Labour was facing a united front of the bourgeoisie, Lenin argued that the best way for communists to shatter the mass illusions in Labour and win workers to the communist banner was to support Labour “in the same way as the rope supports a hanged man”, as he famously wrote. He explained:

“If we are the party of the revolutionary *class*, and not merely a revolutionary group, and if we want the *masses* to follow us (and unless we achieve that, we stand the risk of remaining mere windbags), we must, first, help [Labour leaders] Henderson or Snowden to beat Lloyd George and Churchill (or, rather, compel the former to beat the latter, because the former *are afraid of their victory!*); second, we must help the majority of the working class to be convinced by their own experience that we are right, i.e., that the Hendersons and Snowdens are absolutely good for nothing, that they are petty-bourgeois and treacherous by nature, and that their bankruptcy is inevitable; third, we must bring nearer the moment when, *on the basis* of the disappointment of most of the workers in the Hendersons, it will be possible, with serious chances of success, to overthrow the government of the Hendersons at once”.

—*Left-wing communism: an infantile disorder* (1920)

Lenin's tactic sought to exploit the contradiction between the socialist aspirations of the workers and their pro-imperialist leaders, who were going to betray, so as to advance a

split with the MacDonalds, the Hendersons and the Snowdens (who, by the way, Lenin constantly made a point of naming).

More recently, while in a very different period, Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of Labour produced a similar situation. Corbyn spoke to the pro-socialist aspirations of the working class and faced a united front of the bourgeoisie (at least in the first years of his tenure; things were different in 2019). What was needed for communists was to side with Corbyn against the bourgeoisie, not out of faith that he would advance socialism but precisely to expose the bankruptcy of Corbynism in front of the masses.

Labour and the tasks of communists today

Now, what is the situation today in Britain? Does the bourgeoisie view Starmer's Labour as a threat to its interests? Of course not. The ruling class can't wait to have Starmer at the helm, and a quick look at recent opinion pieces in the *Financial Times* can only confirm this. Far from facing opposition from the bourgeoisie, Starmer's Labour, with the support of the trade union bureaucracy, is in an *open alliance* with the British capitalist class *against* the working class.

What about the working class? Do workers believe that Starmer will advance socialism or even the interests of the working class? Of course not. Starmer's whole project has been based on leading the "counterrevolution" against Corbynism, striking at any pro-socialist pretences and driving out thousands of left-wing members. There is zero enthusiasm for Starmer among working-class voters, and insofar as many will still vote for Labour, it is mainly out of hatred for the Tories and because of the lack of a pro-working-class alternative.

So, yes, for communists in this context to call to vote Labour amounts to *crossing the class line*. In the current context, a vote for Labour is a vote directed explicitly against the aspirations of the working class and *for* an open alliance with the capitalists. This includes voting for left Labour candidates like Zarah Sultana, John McDonnell etc. These left Labourites play a particularly deceitful and criminal role because they speak for "peace" and "socialism" while at the same time working for a Starmer-led government coming to power.

For so-called communists to lift Lenin's tactic from 1920 and mechanically plop it into today is worse than shooting themselves in the foot. In practice, it means deceiving the workers in the same way as the left Labourites, offering a "communist" veneer to scoundrels who openly promise to attack the working class. Instead, the task of communists consists of building a pro-working-class opposition to Starmer's Labour and all trade union bureaucrats and Labourites who support him. It is to advance this struggle that the Spartacist League joined the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition and urges other left organisations to do the same.

The point is not that Starmer is worse than previous Labour leaders or that Corbyn or MacDonald better represented the interests of the working class. All these Labour leaders defended variations of the same liberal-Labourite and pro-imperialist programme. The difference lies in where these leaders stood in the class conflicts and polarisations of a particular period. MacDonald (in the early 1920s) or Corbyn (in the first few years) gave voice to the aspirations of the working class despite their pro-capitalist programme, and for that they faced staunch opposition from the bourgeoisie despite their best efforts at conciliation. Thus, the need for communists to give these leaders a certain amount of parliamentary support to expose them. But in the current context, what is called for is the most irreconcilable opposition to Starmer's Labour. Only in this way is it possible to fight for a break between the most advanced elements of the working class, who are yearning for an alternative, and the current leadership of Labour.

The CPGB often repeated that what is posed is not a break with Starmer but a break with Labourism. To pose the question this way is to understand nothing of Labourism. Keir Starmer is the leader of the Labour Party. He is supported by the whole party, including the left Labourites (Sultana, McDonnell etc) and the trade union bureaucracy (Sharon Graham, Mick Lynch etc), who are in turn supported by the bulk of the "communist" left. This chain, which ties the workers movement all the way to Starmer and the imperialist bourgeoisie, *is* Labourism. You do not need to be a communist to oppose Starmer. But it is grotesque opportunism for so-called communists to speak of a break with Labourism while rejecting a break with Starmer's Labour!

Lenin's goal was to advance a rupture of the working class against its Labourite misleaders, using tactics adapted to the particular circumstances. His point was *not* that Labour should always be supported because it is a bourgeois workers party. Rather, this is how most of the British far left, for almost a century, has completely distorted Lenin to justify maintaining unity with the Labourites, which explains why the British communist movement has always remained a weak appendage of Labourism. The CPGB's insistence that a vote for Starmer's Labour still represents somehow a vote for the working class directly flows from this wretched tradition and stands in contradiction to Lenin, who always emphasised that Labour was the party of the labour aristocracy and petty-bourgeois parasites sitting on top of the workers movement.

In a nutshell, the CPGB's position is simply Labourite, with a thin "communist" veneer.

Comradely,

Vincent David

Spartacist League/Britain Central Committee

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